



**University of  
Zurich**<sup>UZH</sup>

**Zurich Open Repository and  
Archive**

University of Zurich  
Main Library  
Strickhofstrasse 39  
CH-8057 Zurich  
[www.zora.uzh.ch](http://www.zora.uzh.ch)

---

Year: 2012

---

## **Setting and crossing boundaries: professionalization of social work and social work professionalism**

Heite, Catrin

**Abstract:** How is a profession distinguished from a non-profession? In what ways is the boundary between profession and non-profession marked, transformed, and dealt with? And how is social work professionalized in these processes of boundary-setting and boundary transformation? In the perspective of Social Work as Working at the Border I address professionalization, as well as professionalism as boundary-work, boundary-setting and boundary-crossing. This aspect of boundary transformation is discussed in terms of the theory of profession: how does the process of professionalization occur? What is the connection between professionalization, science, politics and the social question? With reference to these questions, a boundary-analytic perspective is outlined in order to review the emergence and development of social work as a profession, and professional ways of handling social inequalities: how is the boundary between profession and non-profession set, secured and transformed? How could this boundary be crossed in processes of professionalization? In the concluding remarks the issue of professionalization as a process will be reversed into the question of professionalism as a mode of practice. Social work will thus be related to a notion of critique, and conceived of as professional boundary-work in the context of social inequality.

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-85442>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Heite, Catrin (2012). Setting and crossing boundaries: professionalization of social work and social work professionalism. *Social Work and Society*, 10(2):online.

## Setting and Crossing Boundaries: Professionalization of Social Work and Social Work Professionalism

*Catrin Heite, University of Zurich*

How is a profession distinguished from a non-profession? In what ways is the boundary between profession and non-profession marked, transformed, and dealt with? And how is social work professionalized in these processes of boundary-setting and boundary transformation? In the perspective of *Social Work as Working at the Border* I address professionalization, as well as professionalism as boundary-work, boundary-setting and boundary-crossing. This aspect of boundary transformation is discussed in terms of the theory of profession: how does the process of professionalization occur? What is the connection between professionalization, science, politics and the social question? With reference to these questions, a boundary-analytic perspective is outlined in order to review the emergence and development of social work as a profession, and professional ways of handling social inequalities: how is the boundary between profession and non-profession set, secured and transformed? How could this boundary be crossed in processes of professionalization? In the concluding remarks the issue of professionalization as a *process* will be reversed into the question of professionalism as a *mode of practice*. Social work will thus be related to a notion of critique, and conceived of as professional boundary-work in the context of social inequality.

### **1 Analytical perspective: “the boundary” and professionalization as boundary-work**

The analytical concept of boundaries is gaining influence in various disciplines, such as science studies, gender studies, history, anthropology, and political science, as well as in educational science and social work theory<sup>1</sup>. Identifying boundaries puts an analytical focus on questions such as the frontiers of nation-states and migration, spatial borders, power and rule, society and social structures, questions of sex, gender and class inequality, subject and identity, knowledge and knowledge production, science, as well as professions and professionalization. Against the background of a wide range of boundary research and different notions of the term “boundary”, Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002) distinguish between *symbolic* and *social* boundaries:

“*Symbolic* boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications. [...] They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources. *Social* boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to

---

<sup>1</sup> On the different notions of boundary, border or limit and frontier, see Veronika Magyar-Haas in this issue.

and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities.” (Molnár und Lamont 2002, p. 168)

Boundaries have great impact on the processes involved in constructing reality, on definitions and classifications, on social (in)equality, the invention of hierarchies, subjectivation, the range of human action and movement, as well as on personal autonomy: as territorial, political, social and normative entities boundaries are “sorting things out” (Bowker/Star 2000), they direct, provoke and structure – they govern – courses of human action. As Michel Foucault puts it, “the boundary” is one aspect of regimes of power: it prescribes social relations, it marks concepts of social order and dualisms of the normal and deviant, the accepted and the unacceptable, the own and the other, the belonging and the not-belonging. These boundaries are objects of a panoptic surveillance that identifies everyone who does not meet the norm and who consequently has to be normalized (Foucault 1995). The boundary classifies, categorizes, sorts, normalizes, includes and excludes, privileges and de-privileges, allocates rights and removes them; the boundary is an *expression* of power relations and governance, and a *medium* for their maintenance. At the same time, it is a characteristic feature of boundaries that they can be crossed. Boundaries inherently produce their transgression. No boundary remains uncrossed; boundaries are contested areas and criticized expressions of authority. In this sense, symbolic and social boundaries not only exclude, deprive and segregate, but also allow those affected to disable such exclusions and to defy them, to operate with the boundaries, and to transform, shift and undermine them.

The analytic term *boundary* is being used in this way in (among others) gender studies, science studies, theories of state, migration research, inequality and power. In what follows, a science studies perspective is outlined and applied to the question of professionalization and professionalism in social work. The first aspect, professionalization, refers to what Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002) call *symbolic boundaries*. Professionalization and the securing of the status of profession is a process of defining the boundary between profession and non-profession by agreeing upon definitions of reality and by disputing and acquiring status and monopolizing resources. This involves claiming, and recognizing, that a certain field of occupational action is a professional field or is in need of professionalization. The second question of professionalism as a mode of practice in social work refers to what the authors specify as *social boundaries*: with respect to social work users, it is the question of their limited life chances, the forms of discrimination they are subjected to, and their “unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (see above) in the sense of social inequality.

Complementing this boundary-analytic perspective, the discussion of the first question will refer to the work of Thomas Gieryn. He is concerned with the question of what differentiates the sciences from other forms of intellectual endeavour, and how the boundary between science and non-science can be defined. In this research perspective, Gieryn analyzes the “Demarcation of Science from Non-Science“(1983); here summarized in order to apply it to the question of the demarcation of profession from non-profession. Applying the concept of “boundary” to inclusion and exclusion, categorization and power, a boundary-analytic perspective addresses the distinction between profession and non-profession in two ways. Firstly, in terms of its function of classification and differentiation: the boundary is a means of distinguishing between diverse occupations, as well as between occupations and professions, in order to establish a hierarchical order in the occupational field. Secondly, with regard to the construct of belonging and not-belonging as a way to define what occupations may be included in, or excluded from, the area of professions. Boundary-setting is efficient in

defining what a profession is and is not, debarring other occupations from a certain professional realm, monopolizing this occupational area, and also claiming professional authority over a sphere. Hence, the question is: how are the differentiation between profession and non-profession, and the transformation of this boundary, conceivable analytically? To address this question, Gieryn's concept of boundary-work (Gieryn 1983) seems appropriate as this notion of "the boundary" highlights the aspects of differentiation, classification, belonging and exclusion.

The fact that "science", and individual scientific disciplines, such as educational science, are today recognized as significant players is the result of a historical process. This process has involved, and will continue to involve, discursive boundary-work concerning areas of responsibility, competences and sovereignty of interpretation. Boundary-work aims "to enlarge the material and symbolic resources of scientists or to defend professional autonomy" (Gieryn 1983: 782). The sociologist Thomas Gieryn traces this process from the middle of the 19th century onwards. Here, "science" is in competition with religion over the sovereignty of interpretation of the origins of the world and humanity. Simultaneously, engineering – regarded as a driver of social progress – produced a new challenge for science and its societal recognition. For science, boundary-work involved the differentiation of engineering and religion as other than science; *science as not-religion* (Gieryn 1983, p. 785) and *science as not-mechanics* (Gieryn 1983, p. 786).

Science can be applied and is of practical value, because it offers an empirically tested, non-emotional, unprejudiced, and thus objective, way of attaining truthful insights through the methodical observation of events. Societal progress is thus dependent on scientific research and scientific knowledge. In the sense of a dependency relationship, it was pointed out in the course of the disputes at that time that praxis produces knowledge only on the basis of unsystematic observation and a trial-and-error process. Science, as the legitimate location of knowledge generation, is applied to explain practical successes and failures, and thus to optimize praxis. A lack of systematic methodology and a lack of objectivity were regarded as characteristics of non-science. The same applies today for the professions: a lack of systematic methodology and the presence of emotionality and "intuition" are regarded as problematic in areas of pedagogical activity, and considered as characteristics of a non-profession. It is also regarded as characteristic of a profession that it possesses its "own" science as a location of academic, empirical and theoretical knowledge generation. And science is – thus both the historical and the contemporary argument – concerned with the search for facts and insights as an end in itself, and so needs not legitimate itself through practical applicability, but has a higher-order task as, in Gieryn's words, the "epitome of human culture" (p. 787).

In the demarcation of science from non-science, it is thus emphasized on the one hand that science as the epitome of humanity is valuable and legitimate *regardless* of direct practical benefit; on the other hand, its *practical applicability* as the provider of the information needed for societal progress is emphasized. Further, Gieryn distinguishes democratic review, a lack of systematic methodology and the assumption of emotionality as significant discursive characteristics of non-science. He thus concludes that science always needs a contrasting figure, an antipole, an other: "Just as readers come to know Holmes better through contrasts to his foil Watson, so does the public better learn about 'science' through contrasts to 'non-science'" (Gieryn 1983, p. 792). In short: science – and we may add: the professions – constitute themselves *ex negativo*.

## 2 Professionalization as boundary-work

The boundaries between profession and non-profession, like those between science and non-science, are historically specific, changeable, inconsistent and fought over. Demarcation against other players thus requires differing arguments, which is why social work – as a science and as a profession – appears “at once theoretical and empirical, pure and applied, objective and subjective, exact and estimative, democratic (open for all to confirm) and elitist (experts alone confirm), limitless and limited (to certain domains of knowledge)” (Gieryn 1983: 792). In the professionalization processes too – as, among others the theoretician of profession Andrew Abbott shows (Abbott 2010 [1988]) – professional territories and areas of responsibility are delineated, privileges acquired and assured, and claims on material resources enforced. One way this happens is that professions are construed as players that – at least *relatively* – act autonomously of politics and economics, according to a *third logic* (Freidson 2001), which makes it possible to demarcate them clearly against other players. In boundary-analytic terms, the *third logic* marks the boundary between profession and non-profession. This boundary must have specific individual characteristics, such as, among others, the availability of an independent science and the generation of scientific knowledge, and specific professional ethics, that represent the foundations of professional autonomy: “Professional ethics must claim an independence from patron, state, and public” (Freidson 2001: 221). Professions claim that with this *third logic*, they operate in a collectively oriented, independent and disinterested fashion, and thus neither as bureaucratic authorities nor oriented on market-based profit. In the same way that scientific knowledge explains practical success and failure, and thus enables improvements, so professional ethics offer immunity against self-interest; professional ethics ensure the common good, as they serve both as a clearly formulated system for the (self)regulation of activities founded on specific values, and also as a system for reflection and the further discursive development of these fundamental values.

Freidson regards the *third logic* as an ideal. In reality – but also in analytic theory – no profession is entirely independent of the prevailing political and economic circumstances, the social conditions and the welfare-state systems within which it functions (Clarke and Newman 1997; Cunningham and Cunningham 2010; Harris and White 2009). It thus seems appropriate to regard the relationships between a profession, its attributive science and politics as a boundary relationship. The boundary relationship with politics can be reconstructed in exemplary fashion in the history of social work, which demonstrates its interweaving with the development of the social state, the bourgeois approach to social issues, and the political demands and activities of the early feminist movement. At this early stage, we also see the access of voluntary and vocational social activities to science, scientific insights and scientific methodology become explicit.

### 2.1 Social work history – the social question and the women’s movement

That social work today is recognized as a profession is historically related to the women’s movement, social reform and the emergence of social politics and the welfare state since the middle of the 19th century. Social work as a “female profession” evolved at the same historical moment as the raising of the so-called *social question* and the decision of the bourgeoisie to handle social inequalities and class-structured social problems with public and political means (Walkowitz 1999). The *social question* – firstly explicitly raised in the early 19th century – concerns the issues of poverty, pauperization, societal disintegration and endangered social cohesion, as well as the origins of social politics. It is concerned with the boundaries between normal and deviant, integration and disintegration, as well as with those

vulnerable and disconnected people who have to survive at the boundaries of society. As Robert Castel (Castel 2003) points out, the *social question* is about processes of social disqualification, vulnerability, disconnectedness and misrecognition that lead to “disaffiliation”<sup>2</sup>. Such people and classes, decoupled and living at the margin of society, are met with helping, supportive, reintegrating, and simultaneously repressive, moralizing and disciplinary measures. Historically, these measures include, among others, forms of poor relief involving methods out of which social pedagogy developed. With the development of government organization of welfare states and public forms of regulating the *social question*, social work was inaugurated as *one* essential player in the state management of social problems.

It is a key aspect here that, since the middle of the 19th century, forms of Christian charity were seen as no longer adequate; rather, it was regarded as necessary to deal with such phenomena in a systematic, publicly organized fashion, on the basis of scientific knowledge. The process of academization and the generation of scientific knowledge also implied the attribution to the needy of characteristics such as poor moral condition, inadequate planning and inadequate effort to improve their own situation. When people or groups – historical or contemporary – are regarded as aberrant, deviant, beyond the boundaries of the acceptable, then social work is boundary-work. This is about normalizing and reintegrating the addressees. Historically speaking, determining need, monitoring lifestyle and the use of the support provided, interaction with addressees on a case-work basis, were those activities that were taken on as tasks by parts of the first women’s movement, who approached the social question from a bourgeois perspective as a form of *working at the border*.

The social and political involvement of middle-class women was first in the form of voluntary, then later vocational work. In this boundary situation of voluntary and vocational social activity, social work developed in the context of approaches to socio-political regulation. The strategy of the first middle-class feminist movement consisted in linking the *social question* with the *women question* at this boundary between politics and social work, in order to create a new area of, initially, activity, and subsequently, paid professional work for women. An important argument of the middle-class feminist movement was its ability to approach the social question, and the identified social problems, on the basis of scientific knowledge, systematic training and a “specifically feminine” manner (Hering 2003; Walkowitz 1999). So, at European level, were founded the *Soziale Frauenschulen*, in which, from the start, a systematic education and a scientific approach were key elements – in addition to an emphasis on those “characteristics” that were regarded as “feminine” such as caring and empathy. Social work was thus invented exactly at the moment when social upheavals were increasingly being discussed in scientific terms, and new, knowledge-based interventions being tested on the basis of these discussions. The main argument of the feminist movement hinged on the essential suitability of middle-class women to contribute to the definition of bourgeois society and societal activity that was no longer based on unplanned charity, but was to be carried out in a planned, systematic and methodical fashion, on the basis of scientific knowledge. With the concept of “mental motherliness” for both training and

---

<sup>2</sup> As emblematic for such situations of disaffiliation, Castel analyses “the vagabond” and “vagabondage” as a result of the distinction between the able-bodied and the disabled poor, and the requirement that the able-bodied poor should work for themselves; failure to do so resulting in qualification as the “undeserving poor” (p. 164). The boundary between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor pushes people such as vagabonds to the margins of society. This situation dramatizes the social question, as to the categories of poverty and neglect in the working class is added that of those who have no work.

activity (Báñez und Ehlert 2005; Sachße 2005), the feminist movement, as part of the bourgeois movement for social reform, contributed to the definition of society and social issues, and determined a central role for social work within the welfare state.

In the practical handling of social issues, the gender of the poor was also significant, as well as the gender of the social worker. In accordance with the prevailing gender norms<sup>3</sup>, for men in particular the lack of willingness to pursue regular paid employment was regarded as deviant, and as a decisive reason for poverty and indigence – which was thus seen as “self-inflicted”. With women on the other hand, far more attention was paid to the extent to which they managed the household, cared for their children and led their sexual lives in accordance with bourgeois standards (Kunzel 1993)<sup>4</sup>. Unannounced visits to the home and questions asked of neighbours about the family being supported, among other means, represented techniques for the bourgeois monitoring of proletarian lifestyles, in the sense of disciplinary interventions across class boundaries. In this way, the class-specific power dynamics between bourgeois and proletarian women found in the context of the invention and professionalization of social work a new location for moralizing, disciplining and monitoring (Kunzel 1993).

Within this historical process, and in the transition into the 20th century, social work developed from being voluntary through being a vocation to becoming a profession. And for this process of professionalization the question is: how is the difference between a professional and a non-professional vocation symbolized? Where is the boundary between “merely” vocational activities and professional activities, and how is this boundary set, secured and transformed?

## **2.2 Professional boundaries – boundaries of professions. science, knowledge generation and professionalization**

As we have clearly seen above, scientific knowledge and systematic training, as seen historically in their essentials in the women’s social schools, and today in the academic sense in universities and colleges, represent a symbolic boundary for the differentiation between voluntary activity, a vocation and a profession. Andrew Abbott (Abbott 2010 [1988]) asks why there should be certain occupational groups that control the generation and deployment of scientific and professional knowledge, and how such groups achieve their power. Concerning these questions, Abbott discusses the “System of Professions” in a comparative and historical way to highlight an analysis of the occurrence and development of professions. In doing so, he focuses on the aspect of jurisdiction, which is related to exclusivity and exclusion, to claim and assure authority over a certain professional realm. Using Gieryn’s science-studies approach and Lamont/Molnár’s notion of symbolic boundaries, professional claims of jurisdiction, as well as competency, authority and sovereignty, can be analyzed as

---

<sup>3</sup> The gender norms of the day allocated differing, complementary characteristics to the two genders. Part of this was that women could work only in educational and caring occupations regarded as familial and suited to their nature. Binary gender allocations of public-private, rational-emotional, thinking-feeling recur in concepts of gender character. This “Polarization of Sexual Stereotypes” (Hausen 1981) developed in the 18th century, and the allocation of physiological and psychological differences to the two genders also had an impact on the development of social work as a female profession.

<sup>4</sup> The monitoring and moralizing regard to lifestyle – sexual, in particular – remains virulent in today’s socio-pedagogical and (socio)political discourse and praxis. This deprecative discourse and praxis is part of the pejorative underclass debate, corresponding to “moral panics” (Klein 2009), and “politics of disgust” (Hancock 2004).

*boundary-work*. In this way, aspects of demarcation such as the presence or absence of scientific knowledge, adequate or deficient autonomy, the presence or absence of a specific professional code of ethics and systematic methodology are used to set jurisdictional boundaries. Thus, classifications of work practice are essential for defining what seems to be “merely vocational” and what might be recognizable as a profession. These symbolic boundaries have been relevant for social work in its emergence as a profession. To this effect, in the early 20th century Abraham Flexner considered the question of social work as a profession, and refers to *science* as well as to *spirit*:

“Would it not be fair to mention as the first mark of a profession that the activities involved are essentially intellectual in character? A free, resourceful, and unhampered intelligence applied to problems and seeking to understand and master them—that is in the first instance characteristic of a profession. [...] If social work fails to conform to some professional criteria, it very readily satisfies others. No question can be raised as to the source from which the social worker derives his material—it comes obviously from science and learning, from economics, ethics, religion, and medicine. [...] But, after all, what matters most is professional spirit.” (Flexner 2001 (1915) 154, 162, 165).

The perception of professional work both as intellectual, science-based, ethically consolidated, autonomous, self-controlled, and also as engaged, impassionate, emotional and dedicated is a feature that is difficult to calibrate when demarcating the boundary between profession and non-profession. As Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star show in their analysis of the professionalization of nursing, scientific research supports recognition as a profession and legitimates jurisdictional claims (Bowker and Star 2000, p. 251). So firstly, social work itself has to be classified as a profession by being differentiated from non-professions, and secondly, social work practices have themselves to be characterized, specified, classified, systematized, methodized<sup>5</sup>, and – last but not least – scientified in order to emblemize certain aspects of professionalism. Insofar as such classifications are “spatial, temporal or spatio-temporal segmentations of the world” (Bowker/Star 2000, p. 10) in processes of professionalization – supported by scientification – professional territories of competencies and jurisdiction are designated, privileges achieved and secured, and demands for material resources met. Further, the classification of profession and non-profession – or the boundaries between profession and non-profession – are historically specific, alterable, embattled and inconsistent.

Historically, social work was long located beyond the boundaries of profession, and was wrongly seen as a (female) semi-profession (Etzioni 1969). This ascription illustrates a historical problem or dilemma: as shown above in the context of the development of social work as a female profession by the middle-class women’s movement, emotionality, care and empathy have been central arguments in establishing social work as an influential factor in handling social problems. Contradictorily, a “full” profession is differentiated from a non- or semi-profession by symbolic boundaries that state that a profession should not be emotional, but that professionals “were expected to relate to the client in a detached, emotionally neutral manner [...] the practitioner’s judgments are guided by reason rather than emotion”(Etzioni 1969, p. 125). So, while since the 19th century “emotionality” has been a means of

---

<sup>5</sup> For an analytical discussion of the differentiation and classification of workplace practices with special respect to the professional-user relationship, professionalism and managerial or market principles and professional emotional management, see Malin 2000.



vocationalization and of moving towards the status of profession, during the historical changes in the 20th century emotions and femininity have had to be eradicated – for example through academization and rationalization – in order to symbolize the boundary between profession and non-profession. With reference to Gieryn’s historical analysis, it could be asserted that the boundary between male and female symbolizes the boundary between profession and non-profession. Male-coded aspects such as objectivity, distance and rationality are regarded as characteristics both of science and also of (scientifically informed) professions. On the other side of the boundary, female-coded factors such as caring, motherliness and closeness are regarded as unscientific and as characteristics of non-professions. Thus, this boundary appears to be a patriarchal one: while femininity and so-called “female” competencies or feminized practices like reproduction and care work are subordinated to scientific, rational, detached or neutral practices which are coded male under the conditions of a gendered society “the whole process of professionalization is one of the bastions of patriarchy”(Hearn 1982, p. 197).

Though social work was predominantly constructed as a non- or semi-profession – as not being capable of professionalizing fully and not requiring professionalization – there has been a noticeable change since the late 1970s. A boundary-transformation has taken place in which social work has been incorporated into the area of professions. This boundary-transformation is an expansion of the field of profession as well as a boundary-crossing by social work itself. Essentially, in the process of professionalization, social work crosses the boundary between profession and non-profession through academization. The establishment of social work in those universities that carry out socio-pedagogical research and theory development and train the next generations for the profession represents a decisive step in social work’s ability to achieve recognition as a profession. In Gieryn’s terms, social work here changes sides, positioning itself as a (male-coded) science, demarcated against non-sciences. It thus acquires a feature that qualifies as a professional characteristic. Such professional characteristics are the symbolic conditions under which practitioners can claim the status of profession for themselves, and under which they are also granted this status. The possession of proprietary scientific knowledge generation symbolizes the boundary between profession and non-profession, and social work crosses this boundary in the moment that it becomes anchored in the universities, and can thus show evidence of proprietary scientific knowledge generation. Social work as a scientific discipline<sup>6</sup> is one of the locations at which knowledge is generated both about the society in which social work takes place and also about its addressees, their supposed deviance from the norms, and how this can be overcome. In establishing social work as a science, this process of academization is part of a boundary-transformation in which social work develops a discipline of its own and thus certain proprietary ways of producing knowledge to strengthen its jurisdictional claims. Status as a science makes of social work a profession; science and scientific knowledge mark the boundary between profession and non-profession. Therefore, science, scientific knowledge (generation) and scientification are instruments of power in processes of professionalization, for which, also, social and educational-political power structures are relevant.

So far, the argument has concerned the professionalization of social work, and the role of science and scientification in this process. These considerations originated in the distinction between *symbolic* and *social* boundaries (Lamont/Molnár); with *symbolic* boundaries the

---

<sup>6</sup> Social work’s status as an discrete academic discipline is also disputed and re-arranged under the conditions of the discourse both of economic crisis and of welfare-state transformations (Lovelock et al. 2004).

focus must be on how and under what conditions players agree upon definitions of reality. The boundary-analytic prospective focuses on boundaries as “an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources” (168): with respect to the professionalization of social work this is the question of whether and how people agree that a certain field of vocational action can be defined as professional realm, and that social work has achieved the status of profession. In conclusion, the notion of boundary now shifts from symbolic boundaries and processes of professionalization to the dimension of *social* boundaries with respect to the *social status of social work users*. This brings the aspect of inequality to the fore. Scientific and professional – and also political – knowledge about class, race or gender differences informs social work practice as a professional way of handling those inequalities; this moves the issue from one of professionalization to one of professionalism.

### **3 From professionalization to professionalism: social work as boundary-work**

The issue of professionalism takes as its starting point a boundary-analytic perspective on social inequality. As mentioned above, social boundaries “are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (Lamont/Molnár 2002, p. 168). The discussion so far has already made it clear that social work deals with social boundaries, and with societal boundary relationships. As a normalizing, disciplinary and supportive agent working at the boundary, it arose in the historical context of the formulation of the social question and the addressing of this question by, among others, the bourgeois feminist movement. Historically specific thematic approaches to societal boundary relationships, such as class antitheses, poverty, “deviance” or “social disintegration”, and thus the construction and reproduction of differential categories such as class, gender, race, are the problematic conditions for the institutionalization of social work from the 19th century onwards (Lamont 1999; Maurer 2001; Mecheril/Melter 2010; Pierson 2011). In this sense, the addressing of potential target groups for socio-pedagogical interventions is already boundary-work, in that it determines which phenomena are to be regarded as problematic, and thus in need of socio-pedagogical attention, so generating groups of addressees on the basis of classificatory allocations – the normal and the deviant. In boundary-analytic terms, these classifications are the necessary, but simultaneously problematic, bases for active social work, as they predetermine under what social conditions and in which individual instances, which forms of socio-pedagogical interventions will occur, and which not: “Each [...] category valorizes some point of view and silence another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous” (Bowker/Star 2000, p. 5). It is also a matter for professional ethics and professional reflection which phenomena are to be classified as socio-pedagogically relevant areas of intervention and which not. In doing so, it is always important to consider what issues will consequently be passed over in silence, and so what problems will *not* be tackled.

As a fundamental component of the welfare state as it develops and continually transforms itself, social work is part of the social condition, and involved in the boundary relationships between economics, politics and social welfare as well as social reform and managerialism (Abramovitz 1999, 2005; Clarke/Newman 1997; Harris/White 2009; Lorenz 1994, 2006; Lyons 2007). It is a differentiating, normalizing and norm-setting player in the management of social issues, and in the disciplinary, moralizing, repressive, monitoring, dismissive and humiliating interventions regarding addressees that this involves (Anhorn/Bettinger 2005; Klein 2009; Andresen/Heitmeyer 2012; Seelmeyer 2008). Structurally, social work thus

functions out of a hegemonic perspective, in which it participates both in the (re)production of the prevailing normality, differentiation and boundary-setting and also, with explicit statements and praxes, in the expansion or deconstruction of these boundaries.

Against this background, an understanding of *Social Work as Working at the Border* is confronted with the following challenges: the need to analyze professional and discipline-related forms of knowledge generation with regard to their classificational, assorting, and inclusionary and exclusionary aspects, in order to work out explicit and implicit dominance relationships, critically and deconstructively. Submissive relationships existing within and outside social work as relationships that limit the possibility for recipients of social work to participate in society are to be critiqued, in both socio-pedagogical activity and socio-pedagogical knowledge generation, as societal structures within which the addressees function and within which they occupy marginalized, repressed and disadvantaged positions. Criticizing these disadvantages in the pursuit of justice means realizing the opposite of what social boundaries are: it means deconstructing social boundaries and achieving *equal* “distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (see above). Hence, for social work with the guiding principle of *boundary-work* or *working at the border* the relation between social work and critique requires adjustment<sup>7</sup>.

Further, the relationships between professionals and addressees and also between professionals, addressees and educationalists require analysis in terms of the fixing or shifting of boundaries, and the (re)production or mitigation of boundary relationships. The question must be addressed of how, among others, racified, culturalized, ethnicized, gendered and class-specific dominance relationships in research, theory development and professional praxis are, or could be, repeated or deconstructed. It must also be asked how these dominance or boundary relationships are interrelated, and how to handle the insight, above all derived from gender and postcolonial theory, that these relationships are not to be hierarchized<sup>8</sup>? This also has implications for the question of what critical social work could be, and what boundary relationships – and which of the social demarcation categories that constitute them, such as, among others, race class, gender – should be handled in what way and with what priority.

Also within socio-pedagogical contexts, there are diverse positions within the fabric of multi-layered, historically developed dominance relationships. If the achievement of social justice is regarded as the task of social work (Böllert et al. 2011; Gil 1998; Lundy 2011; Schrödter 2007), socio-pedagogical professionalism aims to abolish disadvantage and to expand the possibilities for access and participation of its addressees. This aim states that at the moment of socio-pedagogical intervention their possibilities for access and participation are limited, and accordingly to be expanded in congruence with the focus on social justice. Social justice can thus be regarded as a “core value of the profession” (Austin 2013; Baines 2006). Social work professionalism produces welfare and tries to increase social justice. Social workers are experts on social issues who can open up possibilities for their addressees, who enable addressees to achieve previously denied access to goods and ways of life. In practice and

---

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the relation between critique and social work as well as critical social work as working at the border see Susanne Maurer and Fabian Kessl in this issue.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the debate about structures of inequality and domination as well as the question of how the circumstances of racist, (hetero)sexist, classist, ableistic, etc. dominance are interrelated see Andersen 2005; McCall 2005; Weldon 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006.

theory, social work is concentrated on the establishment and re-establishment of its addressees' autonomy and capabilities (Otto/Ziegler 2006). Thus social-work professionalism abolishes constraints and opens up alternatives. Social work is thus *boundary-work* which aims to expand its addressees' limited possibilities for participation by overcoming forms of "misrecognition", "maldistribution" and "misrepresentation" (Lovell 2007) and situations in which "political boundaries [...] deny some people, wrongly, the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction" (Fraser 2005, p. 76). Hence, social work has to deconstruct or weaken such social boundaries by offering addressees better access to economic, societal and political participation, social positions and tangible goods, and must aim to overcome social subordination to gain for addressees the status of equal partners – in society and in socio-pedagogical interactions.

In this task, "the boundary" offers a theoretical, analytical, practical and political perspective for social work as a science and a profession. As shown above in addressing the analytic notion of the boundary, the boundary not only deprives and excludes, but also moves players to take action against these deprivations and to disregard them, and to transform and shift boundaries. Supporting addressees in shifting and crossing the boundaries that constantly constrain their daily life – such as sexist or racist oppression, limited access to economic goods, education or political participation – in undermining or overcoming these boundaries: that is the challenge of professional social work as "transformative social work" (Danso 2012). And this challenge may involve boundary-crossing for the addressees in overcoming "subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society" (Fraser 2000, p. 113). In social work sensitive to boundaries, the boundary can serve in this way as an awareness-raising aid to reflection and the adoption of a specific perspective for praxis, analysis and research in the sense of critical social work. Social work sensitive to boundaries seeks, in theory development, research and professional activity, to disrupt the dominance relationships between professionals and addressees, and thus to change the (professional) conditions that it becomes possible to recognize which differences, hierarchies and boundaries are virulent in social work, which affect it, and how they do so<sup>9</sup>. Socio-pedagogical professionalism can thus be understood as a means – varying in content and full of contradiction – of dealing with boundaries: supporting and enabling, but also monitoring and disciplining. This *work at the boundary* looks critically at, among others, the boundaries that the addressees of social work encounter. Changing these boundaries and boundary relationships so as to enable an increase in social justice is a decisive and challenging perspective for socio-pedagogical research, theory and activity, which at the same time underpins the professional status of social work.

## References

**Abbott, Andrew** (2010 [1988]): *The system of professions. An essay on the division of expert labor*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

**Abramovitz, Mimi** (1999): *Social Work and Social Reform: An Arena of Struggle*. In: *Social Work* 44 (6), S. 512–527.

---

<sup>9</sup> With regard to the theme of the relationship between race and class as dimensions of inequality, Ricky Lee Allen asks, in a critical analysis of the class-theory skew of critical pedagogy: "What would critical pedagogy look like if it had been founded upon the belief that white supremacy, not capitalism, is the central problem of humankind? [...] We seem to be unable to realize that our diminution of race has alienated those who do not have the privilege to ignore white supremacy—no matter what economic form it takes" (Allen 2004 p. 122).

- Abramovitz, Mimi** (2005): The largely Untold Story of Welfare Reform and the Human Services. In: *Social Work* 50 (2), S. 175–186.
- Allen, Ricky Lee** (2004): Whiteness and Critical Pedagogy. In: *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2), S. 121–135.
- Andersen, Margaret L.** (2005): Thinking about Women. A Quarter Century's View. In: *Gender & Society* (19), S. 437–455.
- Andresen, Sabine/Heitmeyer, Wilhelm** (Hg.) (2012): *Zerstörerische Vorgänge. Missachtung und sexuelle Gewalt gegen Kinder und Jugendliche in Institutionen.* Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Anhorn, Roland/Bettinger, Frank** (Hg.) (2005): *Sozialer Ausschluss und Soziale Arbeit.* Wiesbaden: VS.
- Austin, Michael J.** (2013): *Social Justice and Social Work. Rediscovering a Core Value of the Profession.* Sage.
- Baines, Donna** (2006): *Doing anti oppressive practice. Building transformative, politicized social work.* Halifax, N.S: Fernwood.
- Báñez, Tomasa/Ehlert, Gudrun** (2005): Gender and Social Work: Influences of Gender on the Process of Professionalization in Spain and Germany. In: Freitas, Maria José/Freisenhahn, Günter J./Frost, Elizabeth/Michailidis, Maria P. (Hg.): *Children, Young People and Families.* Roma: Carocci editore S.p.A., S. 39–51.
- Böllert, Karin/Otto, Hans-Uwe/Schrödter, Mark/Ziegler, Holger** (2011): Gerechtigkeit. In: Otto, Hans-Uwe/Thiersch, Hans (Hg.): *Handbuch Soziale Arbeit: Grundlagen der Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik*, S. 517–527.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C/Star, Susan Leigh** (2000): *Sorting things out. Classification and its consequences.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. [http://www.gbv.de/dms/weimar/toc/327152982\\_toc.pdf](http://www.gbv.de/dms/weimar/toc/327152982_toc.pdf).
- Castel, Robert** (2003): *From manual workers to wage laborers. Transformation of the social question.* New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers.
- Clarke, John/Newman, Janet** (1997): *The managerial state. Power, politics and ideology in the remaking of social welfare.* London: Sage.
- Cunningham, Jo/Cunningham, Steve** (2010): *Social policy and social work. An introduction.* Exeter: Learning Matters.
- Danso, Ransford** (2012): *Racial oppression in a 'post-race' North America. Transformative social work responses.* Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publ.
- Etzioni, Amitai** (1969): *The Semi-Professions and their Organization.* New York: Free Press.
- Flexner, Abraham** (2001 (1915)): Is Social Work a Profession? firstly published in: National Conference of Charities and Corrections, Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections at the Forty-second annual session held in Baltimore, Maryland, May 12-19, 1915. Chicago: Hildmann. In: *Research on Social Work Practice* 11 (2), S. 152–165.
- Foucault, Michel** (1995): *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison.* New York: Vintage Books.
- Fraser, Nancy** (2000): Rethinking Recognition. In: *new left review* (3), S. 107–120.
- Fraser, Nancy** (2005): Re-framing justice a globalized world. In: *new left review* (36), S. 61–88.
- Freidson, Eliot** (2001): *Professionalism. The third logic.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gieryn, Thomas F.** (1983): Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists. In: *American Sociological Review* 48 (6), S. 781–795.

- Gil, David G.** (1998): Confronting injustice and oppression. Concepts and strategies for social workers. Updated with a new preface.
- Hancock, Ange-Marie** (2004): The politics of disgust. The public identity of the welfare queen. New York. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/academiccompletetitles/docDetail.action?docID=10137163&p00=politics%20disgust>, zuletzt geprüft am 17.12.2012.
- Harris, John/White, Vicky** (2009): Modernising social work. Critical considerations. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hausen, Karin** (1981): Family and Role-Division. The Polarization of Sexual Stereotypes in the Nineteenth Century. An Aspect of Dissociation of Work and Family Life. In: Evans, Richard J. (Hg.): The German family. Essays the social history of the family in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century. London: Croom Helm, S. 51–83.
- Hearn, Jeff** (1982): Notes on Patriarchy, Professionalization and the Semi-Professions (2). <http://soc.sagepub.com/content/16/2/184.full.pdf>, zuletzt geprüft am 13.12.2012.
- Hering, Sabine Waaldijk Bereteke** (Hg.) (2003): History of Social Work in Europe (1900 - 1960). Female pioneers and their influence on the development of International Social Organizations. Bundeskongress Soziale Arbeit. Opladen: Leske + Budrich (Soziale Arbeit).
- Klein, Alex** (2009): Moral Panics Reloaded. Sexuelle Verwahrlosung und die Underclass. In: soziale passagen (1), S. 23–34.
- Kunzel, Regina G.** (1993): Fallen women, problem girls. Unmarried mothers and the professionalization of social work, 1890-1945. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lamont, Michèle** (1999): The cultural territories of race. Black and white boundaries. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont, Michèle/Molnár, Virág** (2002): The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences. In: Annual Review of Sociology (28), S. 167–195.
- Lorenz, Walter** (1994): Social work in a changing Europe. London: Routledge.
- Lorenz, Walter** (2006): Perspectives on European Social Work. From the birth of the nation state to the impact of globalisation. Opladen: Budrich.
- Lovell, Terry** (Hg.) (2007): (Mis)Recognition, Social Inequality and Social Justice. Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu. London: Routledge.
- Lovelock, Robin/Lyons, Karen/Powell, Jackie** (Hg.) (2004): Reflecting on Social Work – Discipline and Profession. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Lundy, Colleen** (2011): Social work, social justice & human rights. A structural approach to practice. 2. Aufl. North York, Ont: University of Toronto Press.
- Lyons, Karen** (2007): Work in Progress: Social Work, the State and Europe. In: Social Work & Society 5 (3). <http://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/134/499>.
- Malin, Nigel** (2000): Professionalism, boundaries and the workplace. London, New York: Routledge. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/academiccompletetitles/home.action>.
- Maurer, Susanne** (2001): Das Soziale und die Differenz. Zur (De-)Thematisierung von Differenz in der Sozialpädagogik. In: Lutz, Helma/Wenning, Norbert (Hg.): Unterschiedlich verschieden. Differenz in der Erziehungswissenschaft. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, S. 125–142.
- McCall, Leslie** (2005): Managing the Complexity of Intersectionality. In: Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society (30/3), S. 1771–1800.
- Mecheril, Paul/Melter, Claus** (2010): Differenz und Soziale Arbeit. Historische Schlaglichter und systematische Zusammenhänge. In: Kessler, Fabian/Plößler, Melanie (Hg.): Differenzierung, Normalisierung, Andersheit. Soziale Arbeit als Arbeit mit den Anderen. Wiesbaden: VS, S. 117–131.

**Otto, Hans-Uwe/Ziegler, Holger** (2006): Capabilities and Education. In: Social Work & Society 4 (2), S. 269–287.

**Pierson, John** (2011): Understanding social work. History and context. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press. <http://lib.myilibrary.com/detail.asp?ID=332092>.

**Sachße, Christoph** (2005): Mütterlichkeit als Beruf. Sozialarbeit, Sozialreform und Frauenbewegung 1871 - 1929. Weinheim: BeltzVotum.

**Schrödter, Mark** (2007): Soziale Arbeit als Gerechtigkeitsprofession. Zur Gewährleistung von Verwirklichungschancen. In: neue praxis (1), S. 3–28.

**Seelmeyer, Udo** (2008): Das Ende der Normalisierung? Soziale Arbeit zwischen Normativität und Normalität. Weinheim: Juventa. <http://www.socialnet.de/rezensionen/isbn.php?isbn=978-3-7799-1226-2>.

**Walkowitz, Daniel J.** (1999): Working with class. Social workers and the politics of middle-class identity. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/academiccompletetitles/home.action>.

**Weldon, Laurel S.** (2006): The Structure of Intersectionality: A Comparative Politics of Gender. In: Politics & Gender (2), S. 235–248.

**Yuval-Davis, Nira** (2006): Intersectionality and Feminist Politics. In: European Journal of Women's Studies (3), S. 193–209.

**Author's Address:**

Prof. Dr. Catrin Heite  
University of Zurich  
Institute of Education  
Freiestrasse 36  
CH-8032 Zürich  
Switzerland  
Tel: ++41 44 634 57 92  
Fax: ++41 44 634 45 40  
Email: [c.heite@ife.uzh.ch](mailto:c.heite@ife.uzh.ch)